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Saint Viator Students Complete Field Day Research on the Chicago River

The wooded banks of the Chicago River took Saint Viator High School students beyond their classroom walls, into the murky waters of the river's north branch at the Linne Woods site in Morton Grove.

Three classes of Environmental Science, or 75 juniors and seniors, spent the day testing the quality of the Chicago River's water, including conducting chemical tests, measuring its flow and erosion, as well as identifying the living organisms as indicators of its overall ability to sustain life.

They worked with teacher Vicky Giusti and members of the Friends of the Chicago River, who are in the midst of a restoration project to preserve the river as a plant and animal life habitat.

Their research came at a critical point in the life of the historic river. Just this month, Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley and the Chicago City Council voted to support the water quality improvements proposed by the Illinois EPA. They include killing bacteria from sewage treatment, stabilizing temperature and dissolved oxygen standards for fish, and making other chemical improvements to upgrade its quality.

The Mayor and the City Council said the improvements will help preserve Chicago's position as a world class city and a leader in the urban conservation movement, especially as it bids to stage the 2016 Summer Olympics.

After returning to their science lab this week, Saint Viator students analyzed their data in order to process their findings. Overall, they determined the quality of the water to be "fair" which surprised many of the students, once they arrived at the water's edge.

"The smell defined it," said senior Hallie Dunn of Barrington. "As soon as you walked in, you sunk. Parts of it were like a muddy swamp."

That's why she and her classmates were surprised at their results which indicated the pH level in the water was excellent, though there was lots of phosphate from run off water, and yet no nitrates.

"It seemed like there was a lot of sediment in the water, possibly from erosion," said senior Kevin Cavers of Arlington Heights.

They found only 20 percent oxygen levels, and when combined with good temperature readings, their overall findings averaged a grading of "fair."

Likewise, the other group of students found a mixed bag when they evaluated the large invertebrates they found living in the river.

“We found lots of crayfish and clams --- both dead and alive --- which can only survive in mildly polluted water,” said senior Ryan Fasano of Algonquin. “But then we were really surprised to find some leeches, or red worms, which survive in very polluted water.”

Test results in all three classes elicited the same results, Giusti said. The students determined the Chicago River’s quality to be fair, and it should respond well to new pollution standards proposed for the massive clean-up.